Queer dancers' experiences in the dancesport world: exclusion, invisibilisation and assimilation

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper intervenes in the consequences of a myth propagated in academic discourse about the dancesport world, according to which half of the men in Latin dancesport are gay. I challenge two assumptions that surround this myth: that cisgender gay men do not contribute to the reification of the heteronormative gender binary, and that the dancesport scene is inclusive of gay people. These assumptions are based on a blatant lack of understanding of the position of gay men within the dancesport world – that is, the ways in which subjects are constituted through the effects of power.

Design/methodology/approach – This work is based on empirical research I conducted in the dancesport community, including ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldwork, extant documents (e.g. books, blogs, Judging Regulations) and interviews with experts and participants of the dancesport scene (2021/2022). To analyse the data, I relied on the principles of dispositive analysis, grounded theory and dance analysis.

Findings – I show that gay dancers have turned to assimilation as their only available strategy. I discuss the negative consequences of assimilation as a political strategy and how it impacted queer dancers – between invisibilisation, residual shame and a failure to challenge the heteronormative gender binary. This led gay dancers to rationalise and perpetrate harm based on the systems of oppression they had internalised.

Social implications – I conclude the paper by highlighting a way beyond assimilation for queer dancers.

Originality/value – This paper addresses a critical gap in research on LGBT + inclusion in dancesport.

Keywords Discrimination, Mixed methodologies, Qualitative, Inclusion, Sex and gender issues, Critical, Assimilation, Heteronormativity

Paper type Research paper

This paper intervenes in the consequences of a myth that is propagated in academic discourse about the dancesport [1] world. It states that half of the men in Latin dancesport are gay. Because some scholars believe it, the quality and relevance of scholarship in dancesport is judged accordingly. In my [previous work] on the heteronormative gender binary in Latin competitive dance, I pointed out that the dancesport dispositive is largely interested in satisfying the male gaze [citation]. One of my reviewers commented that it seemed strange to use the concept of the male gaze when so many men in dancesport are allegedly gay.

If about half of all professional male competitors in dancesport Latin identify as gay, then surely that means that about the same number of adjudicators are gay – the primary audience in dancesport. And if that is the case, why should the dance be designed to please cisgender straight men and their gaze?

Furthermore, if gay dancers really do make up 50% of the pool of male dancers, the dancesport scene must be incredibly inclusive. Many famous dancers in Latin dancesport are

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gay [2]. It is common to hear long lists of former gay world champions or top trainers, so it is tempting to believe the rumours of a warm and inclusive dancesport community.

However, I am less interested in challenging the myth itself (since it has already been done, see Ericksen, 2011, p. 160; Marion, 2008, p. 196) than the assumptions surrounding it, because this has been done far too little. Here, I challenge two assumptions surrounding the myth:

(1) Cisgender gay men do not contribute to the reification of the heteronormative gender binary.

(2) The dancesport scene is inclusive of gay people.

These assumptions are based on misrepresentation and a blatant lack of understanding of gay men's position within the dancesport world. This paper attempts to provide a context to help academic discourse move beyond them.

This work is based on empirical research I conducted in the dancesport community, including ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldwork, participant and non-participant observations, extant documents (e.g. books, blogs, Judging Regulations), and interviews with experts and participants of the dancesport scene (2021/2022) [3]. To analyse the data, I relied on the principles of dispositive analysis, Grounded Theory, and dance analysis.

Here, I assume that the work of demonstrating that, as Ericksen puts it, "sexual identity aside, the performance is resolutely heterosexual" (2011, p. 160), has already been done. As I dedicated [previous work] to this topic, I will not spend any more time on it here. This paper also does not address why queer people get involved in dancesport to begin with, nor what makes them stay. I am simply looking at their trajectories and how they adapt in the face of blatant exclusion.

In the paper, I sometimes use "queer" and "gay" interchangeably. Although gay and lesbian sexualities have historically been associated with queerness, this may no longer be the case in Western societies. Advances in gay rights have allowed gay people to claim privileges previously reserved for heterosexual couples, leading to their assimilation into the new heteronormativity, as described by Allen and Mendez (2018) [4].

In dancesport, however, the expression of homosexuality remains queer in the literal sense: it is strange and disturbing to the heteronormative gender binary and its hegemony. It is queer in a different sense than I am queer in the dancesport world. As a non-binary person, I challenge the heteronormative gender binary in a different way – but some of our experiences overlap, so even though this paper is mostly about gay dancers in dancesport, their experiences may resonate with mine, and we will need to work together to challenge hegemony.

I begin by reviewing the literature on productive power, domination, and assimilation. After a short description of my methods, I move on to describe how the dancesport scene institutionally excludes queerness and how this restricts opportunities for openly queer people. I then consider the types of violence experienced by queer people who have decided to stay in dancesport and the necessity to hide their own queerness. I further discuss how this situation negatively impacts all queer people, as they feel isolated but also perpetrate the abuses caused by the heteronormative gender binary. I conclude by building a case for moving beyond assimilation as a political trajectory.

From domination to assimilation

Power as productive

The two myths I seek to challenge here operate based on a lack of understanding of the ways in which subjects are constituted through the effects of power. According to Foucault, power relations precede us and produce the subjects embedded in them (Oksala, 2016, p. 475). Johanna Osaka explains.

> Being a subject, a socially recognized individual with intelligible intentions, desires, and actions, is only possible within the power/knowledge networks of a society. In other words, the subjects over whom the power network is defined cannot be thought to exist apart from it (2016, p. 475).

Power "generates identities, subject positions, forms of life, and behavioural habits in accordance with particular norms" (Lloyd, 2013, p. 125). This does not mean that individuals are fully determined, but rather that their actions are not entirely voluntary. They are constrained, for example by the gender order (2013, p. 125).

Foucault asserts that all modes of domination, submission, and subjectivation ultimately revolve around obedience (1976, p. 122), because submission to power is "the means by which individuals are produced as a subject with a particular identity" (Lloyd, 2013, p. 127). In modern societies, people are governed by their inscription into the historically and geographically specific norm. Lloyd explains that productive power is "giving rise to normative regimes that discriminate between those whose lives are seen to have value [. . .] and those whose lives do not" (2013, p. 127).

By inscribing themselves into the microphysics of power, individuals "incorporate the objectives of power, which become part of their own being" (Oksala, 2016, p. 477). This means that subjects with a heteronormative order come to adhere to the conventional ideas about sexuality, considering heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as deviant (Allen and Mendez, 2018) [5].

Foucault argues that for power to be tolerable, its inner workings need to be concealed. Specifically, "[i]ts success is in proportion to what it hides from its mechanisms" (1976, p. 113). This can be seen, for example, in the normalisation of heterosexuality. It is *made* normal, natural, through power, by excluding those who deviate from these norms (Lloyd, 2013, p. 126).

The appeal behind submission

To understand the reasons for gay men's participation in the very oppressive system from which they suffer, we need to understand the affective relationship between individuals and power. Feminism undertook a similar task in relation to women's relationship to their own oppression. Highlighting how power shapes subjects' desires allows us to account for women's agency and their own participation in power, for their willingness to "participate in cultural practices that objectify and sexualise them" (Lloyd, 2013, p. 125).

Power operates in our relationship to the norm by shaping our interests, desires, and capacities for critical reflection (2013, p. 125; see also Oksala, 2016, p. 485) [6]. Subjects participate because of the compelling character of the dispositive. Power relations are "tied to powerful sanctions and rewards" (Oksala, 2016, p. 478). As I will show later, the sanctions that gay dancers experience within heteronormative dancesport, for example, affect their access to resources, opportunities, and participation, or leave them with a pervasive sense of deficiency and shame. This sense of shame is a function of the internalisation of patriarchal heteronormative norms and the feeling of not being able to measure up to them (2016, p. 478).

However, participating in the microphysics of power can bring them important rewards, such as a socially recognised identity and the right to participate in competitions or the professional sphere. "Instead of being coerced into adopting disciplinary practices," gay dancers "internalise them as normative habits that become an integral part of their gender identity" (Oksala, 2016, p. 478). Adopting and internalising disciplinary practices is preferable to losing a socially recognised identity and the right to participate that goes with it.

Abjection: the role of the other

Foucault mentioned "the strictly relational character of power relations." He reflects that "[t]hey can only exist as a function of a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of opponent, target, support, surface for a grip in power relations. These points of resistance are

present everywhere in the power network" (1976, p. 126). Power is constituted through opposition. You need an Other in order to identify as the Self.

This implies the omnipresence of abject subjects, practices, thoughts, and actions that are deemed illegitimate. As Marty Huber notes, "[i]n order to produce certain subjects on the landscape of power, it takes not only repetition but also exclusion, it takes reprehensible bodies in the current hegemonic structures that stabilise the normative" (2013, p. 25, my translation). The elements rejected by hegemony at the same time constitute it. Abject subjects in dancesport are characterised by everything that queers the heteronormative gender binary. They are constitutive insofar as the dispositive hunts for every inch of queerness and deploys strategies against it.

Power and dominance

Foucault distinguishes between power and domination: "Whereas power relations are always fluid and can be reversed, states of domination are static power relations that have been ossified through institutions. While we can never eradicate all power relations, we can, and we should, eradicate domination" (Foucault, 1997, p. 299, in Oksala, 2016, p. 483). The micro-physics of power affects larger social structures at a macro level (Lynch, 2014, p. 34).

The interaction between micro and macro forms is what Foucault understands as a dispositive (1976, p. 125). Power and domination mobilise different elements of the dispositive. While civil society seeks to reproduce hegemony through productive aspects (i.e. norms, through disciplinary techniques of the body), the institutions of political society do so through coercion and punishment (Daldal, 2014, p. 157).

Domination constrains our options. As Allan Johnson puts it,

> If a society is oppressive, then people who grow up and live in it will tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it as "normal" and unremarkable life. That's the path of the least resistance in any system. It's hard not to follow it, given how we depend on society and its rewards and punishments that hinge on going along with the status quo (Johnson, 2013, p. 26).

In LGBT politics, this is called assimilation.

Assimilation as the only, but questionable, political strategy

Assimilation is one of the (first) responses of the LGBT community to the pressures of oppressive institutional structures. It is about claiming recognition (mostly in the eyes of the law) as a rational modern subject for being similar to the hegemonic group (Phelan, 1997; Rimmerman, 2018, p. 5). Early gay rights activists advocated that "the LGBT should seek acceptance from the many heterosexuals around them" by trying to "act normal" (Cimino, 2012, p. 126) in order to "remove the stigma of being homosexual, to prevent institutional discrimination, and to achieve societal recognition [by proving] that gay people are 'no different' from anyone else" (Young, 2001, pp. 262–263).

In the case of gay men in dancesport, it seems to have been the only solution so far, as I will show below. However, as a political strategy, it is widely regarded as a failure [7], in part because the privileged groups implicitly define the standards by which all are measured. Iris Young explains,

> Assimilation always implies coming into the game after it is already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards. In the assimilationist strategy, the privileged groups implicitly define the standards according to which all will be measured (2001, pp. 265–266).

Because their privilege remains a blind spot for privileged groups, these standards are not recognised as experientially specific, but appear neutral and universal. They are not and put

oppressed groups at a disadvantage "in measuring up to these standards" (Young, 2001, pp. 265–266). Only the oppressed groups, then, come to be marked as Others.

This "often produces an internalized devaluation by members of those groups themselves." The assimilationist ideal requires "constant self-regulation of one's behaviours" (Young, 2001, pp. 265–266) and causes fear of being discovered and excluded, and shame at not being the same. Young further describes this situation:

> When participation is taken to imply assimilation, the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to accept and adopt an identity one is not, and to try to participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is (2001, pp. 265–266).

Assimilation aims to gain recognition and legitimacy by relying heavily on being normative (Robinson, 2012, p. 334), leading to invisibilisation and reinforcing the oppressed groups' deviant and excluded status. The assimilationist ideal aims for oppressed groups to be tolerated by society on the basis of similarity, which means that the heteronormative gender binary that is hegemonic in society is not challenged and that differences are minimised, rendered insignificant, unworthy of protection or recognition and forced into secrecy (Dean, 2018, p. 53). Invisibilisation is one of the consequences of assimilation into the oppressive system, while heterosexism is not criticised nor questioned.

Assimilation further denies that group difference can be productive, positive, and desirable. Reclaiming an identity that hegemony has taught us to despise and asserting the positivity of group difference proves liberating and empowering (Young, 2001, p. 267). Assimilation turns out to be a burden, a disadvantage, if not an impoverishment.

Asserting the positive sense of group differences forces the dominant culture to discover itself as specific and relative, not universal and all-encompassing [8]. By refusing to assimilate, oppressed groups "[introduce] the possibility of understanding the relation between groups as merely difference, instead of exclusion, opposition, or dominance" (2001, p. 267). As I will show below, gay people suffered from the consequences of assimilationist politics in dancesport.

Methods section

The data in this paper is based on qualitative interviews with 25 people that I conducted as part of my doctoral project. The interviews took place between June 2021 and May 2022 and were mostly about an hour long. I conducted two interviews with two people at the same time, while the rest were one-on-one interviews. All participants were asked to review the data used in the dissertation before submission.

I differentiated between expert interviews and participant interviews. The main difference between these two interview methods is that experts are not anonymised at all, while participants in qualitative interviews are pseudonymised [9]. I contacted the experts because of their particular function within the dancesport scene (see Table 1), while the other participants were found through calls for participation posted online through channels used by the scene.

Five of the interviews I used in my dissertation were conducted by Giulia Settomini in the summer of 2021. She had been researching the consequences of the heteronormative gender binary on dancers and her interviews proved to be instrumental in my research. Her participants have agreed that the data be used for my dissertation. They were all interviewed according to the same guideline, which I have included in the appendix [10]. The guideline aimed to understand how the heteronormative gender binary implemented on the dance floor affected the participants' private lives. The women, gay men and non-binary people interviewed all had a different perspective on this due to their positionality. Of the seven interviews quoted in this article, three were conducted according to these guidelines.

Interviewee	Pronouns	Function/role in the community	Nationality
Irene Hanke	She/her	Gender Mainstreaming and Diversity Management Expert at the Austrian Dancesport Federation, former top dancer, trainer, and adjudicator	Austria
Peter Steinerberger	He/him	Sports Director of the Austrian Dancesport Federation, former top dancer, trainer, and adjudicator	Austria
Thomas Marter	He/him	Former Gender Mainstreaming and Diversity Management Expert at the Austrian federation, same-sex competitor	Austria
Denise	She/her	Director of the Claremont Colleges Ballroom Dance Company	USA
William*	He/him	Former top dancer and trainer	Italy
Raven*	They/them	Former top dancer and trainer	Germany
Pessoa*	They/them	Former top dancer and trainer	Portugal

Note(s): *These names have been chosen by my interviewees to protect their confidentiality
Source(s): The author's own work

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Some of the participants are active adjudicators. All are or have been top level competitors. The participants are from Austria, Germany, Portugal, Italy or the USA and have been active in the WDSF competition circuit, with some limited experience of the other world federations, the World Dance Council (WDC) or the World Dance Organisation (WDO). The participants I feature in this article are all part of the LGBTQIA + community. In this paper, I use data from interviews conducted with the following participants [11].

Dancesport's will to eradicate queerness

Queerness as constitutive and threatening

Queer people have always been constitutive of the dancesport community. The scene defines itself and develops through the eradication of queerness. Federations regulate who can participate in their competitions through their Competition Regulations. These documents exercise a power of definition. They determine which subjects are worthy of rights, which bodies may take part in competitions, and what the gender distribution of the couple must be. They are the law on which institutional coercion is based, requiring participants to (be able to) submit in order to gain the right to participate.

The World DanceSport Federation's Competition Regulations enforce a heteronormative sex binary, stating that "a couple consists of a male and a female partner" (World Dancesport Federation, 2021). Being "female" or "male" is what allows dancers to register with federations, and they can only partner with the opposite binary sex. The rules thus privilege cisgender men and women, heterosexuality, and the exclusive model of the nuclear family. They deny access to competitions to gender non-conforming, intersex, trans* and non-binary people, to sexualities that are not heterosexual, and to more flexible or "alternative" partnerships.

Irene Hanke explains in our interview how this came about:

> Irene: In the [International DanceSport Federation (IDSF, formerly WDSF)], there has never been [a description of] what a couple should look like. Why? Because it is actually quite clear, because one [did] not even think about anything else [. . .] There was no consideration at all that there could be something else [than heteronormative binary dancesport]. So, it wasn't explicitly mentioned. Years ago – I think I was just at the beginning of my career, more or less – there was the Dutch champion couple in the standard dances. They were a married [heterosexual] couple who were Dutch champions and they used to dance Blackpool all the time. And at some point, the husband came out

> that he would rather be a woman [sic!], that [s]he didn't feel comfortable in h[er] body, and [s]he had an operation, but [s]he continued to dance with h[er] wife [. . .,] in the leading role.
>
> And they continued to train and – well, and Holland has always been more open in that respect anyway, so it wasn't really such a problem, nobody made any waves. And then they registered [for] Blackpool, for the [biggest] competition [in the world], and then the [organisers] in Blackpool, at the competition itself, found out that these were two women and there was such a big, big fuss – "what are we going to do now?" – but they couldn't do anything because it wasn't a violation of the rules. And then the IDSF defined a couple in their statutes [12]. [. . .] At the time – when will it have been, 1970 or so . . . ?

The presence of a queer couple was enough for the WDSF to change its Competition Regulations to ensure that it would never happen again.

The exclusion of queer people is not a phenomenon of the past. The Solo and Duo disciplines are new competition categories created to allow (young female) dancers who have not found a (male) partner to compete in Latin (or Ballroom) competitions. Dancers dance a set routine alone (Solo) or dance the same routine side by side but without interaction (Duo). Solo and Duo are the answer of the dispositive to allow the surplus of women to dance without endangering the heteronormativity of dancesport. It is the solution the federation has found to the problem that we have more women than men, a solution that allows women to dance without allowing same-sex dancing.

Impact on queer people and their (professionalising) opportunities

A policy designed to exclude a particular demographic based on gender, sex or sexual orientation affects teaching, training, and competition opportunities for people outside the heteronormative gender binary. Irene went on to describe that because dance clubs are affiliated to the Austrian Federation, and the Federation itself is affiliated to WDSF, they reject couples based on WDSF Competition Rules, stating that "we cannot accept same-sex couples in our club because they are not allowed to dance in any of our competitions."

Dancesport officials try to protect the heteronormative gender binary with all their might and are prepared to lobby against the "invading" LGBTQ + community, even threatening to resign in order to discourage the efforts of community members. Irene remembers two women who joined her club because they wanted to dance together. She comments:

> I fought for a year in the club because the presidium said, "No! Surely not." And the vice-president at the time resigned twice that year, said "I can't talk to her and I wouldn't dream of it and there's no way we're going to do that and if Irene doesn't resign immediately, I'm leaving."

The heteronormative dancesport community is not afraid to use drastic methods to get what they want, which is most often the exclusion of openly gay dancers.

This also impacts on queer dancers' opportunities to get the necessary qualifications to become professionals (adjudicators or trainers). To get the lowest qualification in Austria (the prerequisite for the higher licences, especially the WDSF licence), dancers need to have been in S class in one discipline, the one they are allowed to judge. Hence, they must have competed for years in the heteronormative competition circuit and have been somewhat successful, enough to progress through the classes.

The situation is similar for teaching. To be admitted to the first degree, dancers need to have competed in the heteronormative circuit up to B class in at least one discipline. To become a state-certified trainer, one must have reached S class in one discipline (Österreichischer TanzSport Verband, 2023). So, queer people must pursue heteronormative dancing for years if they want to become professionals, be it in the form of judging or teaching.

I say "heteronormative dancing" because even though same-sex couples have achieved top results in Blackpool, which nowadays welcomes all couples, that does not mean they can judge. They would require an exemption in Germany, as Peter Steinerberger explained in our interview:

> In Germany they have the Equality Federation [the Deutscher Verband für Equality Tanzsport, DVET], which is affiliated to the [German Dancesport Federation], but still independent, which means that the couples who dance there never have the chance to go on to become trainers or adjudicators. And there is, for example, a very good female couple who have already danced in Blackpool and were in the final. And I think it is kind of unfair.

Getting an exemption is very rare for top German same-sex couples, but it is still possible. However, it is not possible in Austria because the training is a state apprenticeship regulated by the Bundessport Akademie, the national sports academy. Participation in the heteronormative competition circuit is therefore an almost unavoidable prerequisite for becoming a professional in the dancesport world.

Queerness is both constitutive and threatening in dancesport, as it is a force strong enough to lead to the creation of policies that exclude it. The federations' systematic exclusion of queerness negatively impacts the opportunities of queer dancers. If they do not conform to the heteronormative gender binary, they can be/are/have been denied access to training venues, classes, as well as professional opportunities based on their success as dancers, such as adjudicating or teaching.

Complying for fear of being excluded

Dancers must choose between assimilation or marginalisation. Complying with the demands of the heteronormative gender binary becomes a necessity for queer people who want to take part in dancesport.

Acting out a romantic/sexual relationship

Dancesport heteronormative couples are expected to portray an intimate relationship with their partner for as long as they are on the dance floor. Peter commented:

> It doesn't matter what the relationship is between the partners in a heteronormative dance partnership, right? It doesn't matter to me if they live together, if they go to bed together or not. It's about what they offer me on the floor. As a couple. Yes? So, the private life is one thing, and the other thing is what I then portray – the acting.

Dancers must conform to the heteronormative binary ideals of dancesport by performing the master narrative, which is that of a heteronormative romantic or erotic relationship. The dancesport community does not mind dancers' sexuality or gender identity, provided they perform according to the heteronormative gender binary. You can be gay and dance, even be successful, even be world champion – as long as you hide it.

This means that gay men have had to learn to act. Dancesport teachers freely give acting advice by comparing the situation of gay people to that of Hollywood actors. They assume that gay dancers are in a similar situation to male actors who must play emotionally and physically romantic scenes with a female actress with whom they are not in a relationship.

I argue that this premise is flawed. The requirement is fundamentally different. By using this argument, the dancesport scene declares queerness to be irrelevant, not only for them, but also for gay dancers. Heterosexual male actors who have to kiss a woman for the sake of acting, whether or not they are with or attracted to that person, are in a different situation to gay people who have to act for the sake of their success, placement and participation in the whole competitive environment.

But the dancesport scene requires acting from gay people because intimacy and quality are framed in a heteronormative way. Queer dancers need to have two completely different personalities, one that is who they are in real life and one that is for the dance floor, because who they are would not make them successful on the dance floor.

William mentioned: "I remember this feeling that I didn't feel like myself when I was dancing. [. . .] When I was younger I thought, 'Oh well, that's it, that's what I have to do.'" Dancers have to become someone else to meet the expectations of dancesport. They negotiate with themselves about how much they are willing to take. They inscribe themselves in the microphysics of power, accepting the hegemony, playing along in order to gain certain benefits, such as the right to participate, success, recognition, acceptance, support from the elders.

The primacy of the performance of the heteronormative romantic and sexual relationship negates and invisibilizes any other relationship that the partners might have with each other, but also that the dancers have with other people in their private lives. The competition rules determine who can say what to whom, as same-sex partnerships and gender non-conforming people are not allowed to register.

Homophobia and misogyny as heteronormative teaching tools

Queer dancers also face homophobia in the learning situation. William told me about his experience with one of his trainers who regularly used homophobic slurs during private or group lessons. The trainer's highly homophobic attitude made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

Homophobia and misogyny are common ways of teaching dancers to perform the "correct" (as in heteronormative) gender. Raven testified to being bullied to achieve ideal standards of masculinity, with little success:

> It definitely has affected me when I was younger, because [. . .] literally every single week, teachers told me, "I need to be more muscular," and "I need to be bigger. I need to be stronger" and because I'm a very vulnerable person, it just give me the message, I was wrong . . . The way I was, you know? Um, and that stayed with me for *emphasis* years because they always told me I was too soft. And I'm like *sighs* "Well, I'm *emphasis, sigh* queer," you know, but at the same time, there was just – I mean, I'm over it now, but like, it just *emphasising each word* carried on the whole time, because they wanted me to be like this one way and . . . I don't know, like I really struggled with that. Because I never I never, you know, I never achieved what they wanted me to do, like physically the strength.

Men are constantly shamed and told to produce the ideal body image. Failure to become muscular and strong means that they are failing at masculinity altogether. The pressure to conform leads them to reject the part of themselves, their identity, their diversity, that does not fit this ideal, which can have long-term effects on mental health. It is also an issue of privilege, as men who are generally taller, wider, and faster at building muscle will find it easier to meet these demands than thin, short, and lean men. It is worth remembering here that size is not a prerequisite for quality in dance: these body ideals meet heteronormative aesthetic demands.

Tony Nunez, dancer and teacher, describes this in the "Today Over Tea" podcast:

> There was a lot of that – just kind of going through my own experiences like, "oh, Tony, butch it up," like a coach would tell me in a coaching, or "stop being so femme or blablablablabla" (Today Over Tea, 2020, pp. 36–40)

Dancers learn through verbal violence and gendered language that their homosexuality is not right for the dancesport world, as extensive research has already shown (Meneau, 2020; see also Richardson, 2018). The "proper" gender performance is learnt through violence, such as discriminatory or abusive language, sometimes used to teach movement and mechanics.

Consequences of assimilation on queer dancers

Historically, assimilation was the only strategy available to gay dancers. It was a response to exclusion. It was a means with which to stay in a scene that meant so much to them – but it came at a high cost. The assimilationist approach led to three consequences for queer dancers. First, their invisibilisation. Second, the struggle to come to terms with their own queerness, and third, their own participation in the heteronormative gender binary and the violence it requires them to inflict on others.

The myth of inclusivity and invisibilisation

I mentioned in our interview with Peter Steinerberger and Thomas Marter – former gender mainstreaming expert for the Austrian federation, same-sex competitor and Peter's husband -how easy it is for academics to assume that dancesport is inclusive. Peter reacted immediately:

> Peter: Wrong! Wrong. It was not easier in the past. That's a complete misconception. They didn't come out of the closet. It was just known at some point, but it wasn't like he went over and said: "Hello, I'm gay", right? [. . .] No, it certainly wasn't easier in the past, by any means. So- that's- that's an issue, especially because the public was still far from [where we are now]. Maybe it was more [that] people suspected it or believed it, yeah, but they didn't live openly because of it, it was more like whispering or – well, you always knew anyway, or something like that, yeah . . .

Thomas mentioned that in dancesport, "you didn't have to explain anything. You just kept quiet and that was it." Hiding who they were, and their relationships, became a particularly important task for queer people within dancesport. It became a matter of not screwing up the reputation they had built up in the heteronormative dancesport world. Queer dancers learnt how to not talk about their queerness nor to experience it openly. The dancesport scene is not supportive of queer dancers at all. On the contrary, the norms of the scene encourage dancers to render their queerness invisible if they want to continue competing.

This serves the dancesport dispositive well. The community at large, the clubs, the federations, they can all ignore queer people and act as though we are not part of it. Our needs, our desires, our presentation, our dancing is made invisible, heteronormative and binary, as if we were never here in the first place. The federations' and community's efforts to erase us overlapped with gay dancers' own efforts to appear similar.

Coming to terms with their queerness

Because older/other queer people hide their queerness, younger queer dancers feel quite isolated with their own journey in dancesport. Denise Machin highlights that queer people have very few role models to relate to: "I'm just trying to do my best. [. . .] like one of my struggles as a teacher is because. I think we're doing the best out of everybody in inclusivity. It means that I don't have any role models, right?"

My interviewees talked about the lack of visibility of other queer dancers, of feelings of loneliness and the burden it caused, the lack of role models, solutions, and orientations. William explains:

> Because then, [. . .] you get into a loop, no? Where you first say "well, everyone is like this, I should be like this, but I don't know if I can do it well enough because, actually, maybe, I am not! Also, because, anyway, maybe you are starting to notice – which means you already know – about your homosexuality and therefore" . . . you are making it even worse because you are trying to "hide" it, right? Or anyway, even if you are free enough to say, "Yes, I'm gay," when you go dancing you still have to affirm your machismo, they expect you to show it while you're dancing.

The scene is so heteronormative that it can feel even harder to discover your queerness than in other communities in Western societies. Pessoa emphasised in our interview that having to

hide such a significant part of their life made them particularly vulnerable. The realisation that they did not live up to the heteronormative ideal fed these feelings of devaluation. They mentioned that discovering their own queerness within the dancesport environment was an additional challenge:

> I was trying to . . . define my sexuality and, you know, my own person apart from the dancing. But because the dancing was so much part of my life, uh did a little bit of a . . . you know, a little bit of a . . . twist in my mind, you know, like, I would probably . . . I would have come out maybe earlier if I wasn't a ballroom and Latin dancer. I would have been, I don't know . . . freer to wear certain things.

Defining themselves apart from dancesport sounds like they were experiencing an either/or situation – like they could not have it both ways.

> Pessoa: Sometimes there's still this sort of stigma of, you know, I don't want to be bullied, I don't want to be criticised, I don't want to . . .
>
> Val: [. . .] So, in the dancesport environment, you never had a place to be yourself?
>
> Pessoa: No, not really. Obviously, I enjoyed improving my technique and my skills as a dancer. But there was never . . . Yeah, that's true, that's quite true, you know?

Pessoa went on to say, "I think there's a lot [. . .] of LGBT people that are hidden away, and that's because of that sort of mask. You know? Because you play the role for so long" that coming out, even to yourself, proves so challenging. Discovering and accepting your own queerness is particularly challenging when you have no role models, no predecessors, and when it challenges your participation in an activity in which you have already invested so much and care so much about.

William talked about the impact of dancesport norms on his life: "The fact is that dance itself is a representation of something, so it is a kind of performance show, an act too, right? Ok, but damn it, within limits, that is, this cannot go on to interfere in the reality of the life of each one of us, which is unfortunately what happens instead." The relationship, the story, the performance takes on too much importance, it asks those who do not fit to sacrifice who they are to be who the dancesport scene wants them to be in order to be successful. It interferes with our lives, it is a disturbance.

William added later that he "always felt unfit for what I was doing anyway. It is certainly probable that perhaps it depended on the outside anyway. But it surely was something inside of me as well." Carrying this shame and sense of isolation is a common feeling for those who do not conform to the heteronormative gender binary. We end up feeling responsible for being at odds with what is expected of us. Of course, this feeling increases when our inadequacy is greater: when I am gay and have to act out heterosexual desire, when I am trans and have to pass as cis . . . The feeling of isolation cuts us off from other people. We feel that we cannot share it, that there is something inherently wrong with us.

And we fear the disastrous consequences of speaking out – even for ourselves. At best, it would make us sound ridiculous to everyone else; at worst, it would cut us off from this practice that has been so central, so fundamental to our lives. It is a kind of gaslighting: if we are afraid that speaking up, telling our truth, expressing our boundaries will cause people to punish us for it, we will not.

Gay dancers' participation in the dispositive

Because hiding who they are is so significant to their participation in the scene, gay dancers become disconnected from whom they really are, making them complicit in dancesport's dispositive and values. Accepting the norms and trying to live up to them leads them to reproduce harmful behaviour and language as dancers and when they become teachers themselves.

All teachers, gay and straight, perpetuate harmful gender norms, if not outright homophobia. I have met gay male teachers and adjudicators, and straight women, who teach extremely heteronormative competitive dancing. Tony adds:

> I've had a number of gay coaches who are like, "yeah, of course I'm gay, but I still, you know, I still did this as a leader, and I still did this as a leader, and I still did this." [. . .] So what that did was it perpetuated a whole generation of [. . .] gay people [who,] if they wanted to be serious about their dancing, they had to live this facade of a life (Love.Live.Dance, 2022).

Trying to make sense of an unjust world that offers them very few options for change, gay people may have ended up rationalising and justifying it so that it did not seem unfair, and they could accept it. They end up identifying with the goals of the hegemony. Participation in dancesport is so important to them that they accept the cost of that participation.

Moving past assimilation towards organising resistance

Nunez advocates for the reclaiming of the queer identity in dancesport:

> I think one of the most important things about understanding the dance industry is to understand yourself fully first. And if you're not in a complete understanding of yourself, you know, then there is a higher chance for you to get swallowed up by this industry and for people to put their own labels and their own, um, uh, You know, um, kind of just, they cloak you and whatever they want you to be or think you should be (Love.Live.Dance, 2022).

Understanding who you are allows you to hold on to it against the dancesport community's attempts to shape your personality, like a child trying to hold on a dandelion thistle while hundreds of people are blowing on them everywhere. Your body becomes a battleground between what the dispositive wants you to be and who you are trying to be. This requires a special kind of self-care, "so that you don't get lost in what they want you to become on the dance floor" in an environment that constantly tries to delegitimise who you are (Today Over Tea, 2020). The first step is to find out who we are and stand up for it:

> Tony: It takes a lot for people to kind of rise above that and not be pigeonholed into any one thing, but also be really explorative with their identity within their dancing.
>
> So, uh, it takes a lot, but that first step is to have a full understanding of who you are and what you are willing to . . . negotiate with, but all the things that you are not willing to compromise, like, you know, or sacrifice, I should things that you are willing to compromise, but not sacrifice (Love.Live.Dance, 2022).

This is a necessary step in the deconstruction of internalised norms and structures. Eventually, if enough people manage to stand up for themselves, the queer community may grow strong enough to leverage their position and fight for the right to show who they are on the dance floor.

Conclusion

Irrespective of how many gay dancers there really are in dancesport, the scene is not inclusive of gay people. It defines itself and has developed through its eradication of queerness, be it by prohibiting gender non-conforming, trans* or queer people from participating in competitions, by preventing queer people from showing their queerness if they do participate, and by enforcing heteronormative behaviour between binary genders.

This negatively impacts queer people, restricting their possibilities if they do not want to be assimilated within the heteronormative dancesport world. Should they wish to dance queerly, they face barriers in accessing learning opportunities, as well as further professionalisation training to become a teacher or adjudicator.

Those who choose to stay are structurally required to hide their queerness to participate. They must conform to the gender binary and compete with a partner of the opposite sex. They are also required to perform romantic or sexual desire towards their partner, regardless of how they feel about them or that gender in general.

Aside from how they are required to behave on the dance floor, queer people are also faced with homophobia associated with misogyny when learning to dance. This encourages them to hide their queerness further, as they may feel like the dancesport world is hostile towards queer people. The amount of exclusion, invisibilisation, silencing, violence and abuse leads me to conclude that the dancesport scene is far from being accepting, tolerant, and inclusive of gay male dancers.

Because of this, the main strategy of sexual minorities in dancesport to date has been to assimilate into the dominant culture to gaining access to heterosexual institutions. Assimilation resulted in "a renewed privacy, a residual shame, and a failure to challenge heterosupremacy" (Phelan, 1997, p. 66), as I have shown is the case in dancesport.

Because queer dancers had to hide, their queerness remained invisible in dancesport. This is particularly convenient for the dancesport community, as they can continue to ignore queer people's needs as if they did not exist and judge them according to heteronormative binary standards. This caused queer dancers to struggle to come to terms with their own queerness, feeling ashamed, isolated, and deprived of a community or role models.

At the same time, queer dancers may have felt the need to legitimise the unfair situation they were facing by rationalising and internalising it. This led them to further contribute to the reification of the heteronormative gender binary by advocating for invisibilisation strategies, justifying the need for queer people to act, teaching heteronormative dancing. In this way, they become active agents of hegemony, invested in the ideology that exploits them. This debunks the second myth by showing how cisgender gay men also contribute to the reification of the heteronormative gender binary.

Bettering queer people's situation in dancesport will require challenging the internalised shame resulting from the hierarchy between heterosexuality/homosexuality and gender deviant/gender conforming. Challenging the status quo, but also the project of assimilation, is of central importance here. It is about queer people's political project in dancesport and about recognising that "the rejection and devaluation of one's culture and perspective should not be a condition of full participation in social life" (Young, 2001, p. 267).

It will require queer people to care for themselves, set healthy boundaries, deconstruct the values the dancesport community has engrained in them, and value their own difference. Asserting positive difference allows oppressed groups to challenge hegemony's claim to universality. Deconstruction work will also be necessary to make sure that queer people do not perpetrate the damage linked with the heteronormative gender binary.

Building on this towards self-organisation, future activist work will require us to question structures and ask dominant groups to take responsibility for their complicity in the ways in which queer dancers have been excluded and devalued. They need to be accountable and acknowledge their privilege and the cost at which it has been bought (Young, 2001, p. 267). Eventually it will positively impact queer kids in dancesport, providing them with role models and ensuring their time will be better than ours.

Notes

1. Dancesport is the competitive counterpart to ballroom dancing. It has two main disciplines, Latin and Standard. Latin consists of five dances: samba, cha-cha-cha, rumba, paso doble and jive, while standard consists of waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow foxtrot and quickstep. This paper is more concerned with Latin dances, although there will be many overlaps with Standard dances.
2. Suzie Hardt writes in her WDC ED paper: "Everyone knows gay dancers have always been a huge part of the ballroom world as top dancers, coaches, educators, world champions" (Hardt, 2012).

Peter Steinerberger mentioned in our interview that there was a period in Dancesport history when five out of six male dancers in the final at Blackpool (the most influential competition in the world) were gay.

3. All participants had to sign two consent forms, one before the interview and one after receiving the transcript. The project was validated by the ethics committee of the University of Salzburg. Participants were pseudonymised, while experts were not.

4. Their paper highlights a very important characteristic that defines hegemonic heteronormativity: as a system, it is dynamic and evolvable. They describe how hegemonic power and normalcy shifts to other and/or additional groups, privileging, normalising and legalising certain lesbian, gay and trans individuals. They describe the integration of monogamous gay and lesbian identities into heteronormativity through the concept of homonormativity. By "assimilating into heteronormative culture through monogamy, domesticity, and consumption," lesbian and gay individuals sought "inclusion in, and the privileges granted by, traditionally heterosexual institutions such as marriage and parenting" (2018).

5. It is similar to the way in which subjects within patriarchy adhere in part or in full "to the conventional ideas about gender inequality where male superiority is accepted as part of the natural order of things," see (Sultana, 2010, p. 123).

6. See also Rosemary Hennessy, "pleasure does not precede or exceed the social but is itself constituted through the often contradictory economic, political, and ideological production of social life" (2018, p. 147).

7. The assimilationist hope is now being expressed internationally through homonormativity and the single-issue politics around same-sex marriage. It suggests that provided homosexuals keep their "deviance" behind closed doors and leave hegemony unchallenged, they can share in the privileges ascribed to heterosexuality, such as marriage or adoption. In *Cruising Utopia*, Munoz describes the LGBT community's willingness to trade a "retreat into the private sphere" to "purchase a seat at the table," (2009, p. 54). Matt Bernstein Sycamore describes the "ways in which gay people have become obsessed with accessing straight privilege at any cost," highlighting how "the dominant signs of straight conformity have become the ultimate signs of gay success," (Ruiz, 2008, pp. 237–238).

8. Young explains that "[w]hen feminists assert the validity of feminine sensitivity and the positive value of nurturing behavior, when gays describe the prejudice of heterosexuals as homophobic and their own sexuality as positive and self-developing, when Blacks affirm a distinct Afro-American tradition, then the dominant culture is forced to discover itself for the first time as specific: as Anglo, European, Christian, masculine, straight. In a political struggle where oppressed groups insist on the positive value of their specific culture and experience, it becomes increasingly difficult for dominant groups to parade their norms as neutral and universal, and to construct the values and behavior of the oppressed as deviant, perverted, or inferior," (2001, p. 267).

9. The experts are neither anonymised nor pseudonymised, the reason being that their position within the scene is precisely what makes them important for my research. This is a special feature of this established research method, in sociology, dance studies, gender studies and qualitative social research in general. I interview these experts because of their specialist knowledge and they explicitly agreed to their identity being made public, see for instance (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011) The participants for qualitative interviews are pseudonymised without exception, and the data are edited so the participants are not identifiable.

10. Keep in mind that the interviews were semi-structured, meaning that we had to react and adapt to the interview situation according to the participants' topics.

11. Although, in retrospect, it would have been interesting for a paper like this to ask every participant about their age or sex/gender/sexual orientation, these data were not really relevant to the qualitative interviews. It did come up from time to time when it was relevant, and I mention it in the paper when necessary.

12. Readers familiar with the Federations in Dancesport will remember that Blackpool is organised by the World Dance Council (WDC). When I asked about this, Irene mentioned that the IDSF had also adapted their competition rules in response to the situation in Blackpool.

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Appendix
Interview guideline

(1) What's your dance background/your story?

(2) What do you understand as sexism?

(3) Have you ever experienced sexism in dancesport environments (on the dance floor/outside of the dance floor)?

(4) How has this affected your life, if at all?

(5) Do you perceive that the way genders are portrayed on the dance floor affects the social mechanisms outside of the dance floor?

(6) Have you ever wondered whether the dancesport environment was a healthy one? If yes, what made you question it?

(7) How do you reckon unhealthy mechanisms in dancesport could change?

(8) Is there a way to promote healthy eroticism in dancesport?

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